

"In Paris, you can buy a beer at McDonald's."

Pulp Fiction, 1984



Figure 2.
Credit: Mike
Devereux

Mike Devereux is a geographer-planner. He is a senior lecturer in the Department of Planning and Architecture at the University of the West of England, Bristol. His research interests centre on understanding the value of borders and the visual identity of place.

My research asks how do I know that I am in Paris?

Prima facie the answer is straightforward. Le Périphérique is a 35 kms long ring road around Paris following the line of the defensive wall demolished in 1929. It marks the administrative boundary of the city; inside is Paris, outside is not. In reality the answer is more complicated. My focus is on three communes: Paris, St Mandé and Montreuil (fig 1).

To get nearer to the answer I use a deep mapping technique that relies on a detailed understanding of the subject being unearthed in the same way as an archaeologist. I draw on the work of Michael Shanks¹. I gather all evidence from trivial to fundamental clues to piece together a picture of the present. This comes from observing and recording everything that leads me to an opinion on whether or not I am in Paris. It is eclectic and it has been used to good effect by William Least Heat-Moon² in

understanding Chase County in central Kansas. It is a development of the work of psycho-geographers and helps planners understand the space in which they intervene. It uses the concept of the detached urban observer developed by Benjamin and applied to a modern landscape by Sinclair and Self³. As psycho-geography does, it explores an interface between the institutional fabric of a city and the place that underlies that controlling layer. The important point is that the method relies on me as an expert observer interpreting clues I find.

To explore and collect evidence I set up a grid of twenty 100m x 100m squares centred on the Périphérique as the base for my 'archaeological' investigation. Within that I gather all the evidence I can to help answer my question. This evidence takes the form of visual and aural clues: some are objects attached to the ground or buildings, others moveable; some are noises by humans, machines or simply nature. To supplement the grid a walk is superimposed over the area of study. The route of this walk is determined by my attempt to walk on the boundary, as I perceive it, between Paris and the outside world – as in a *dérive*. As an archaeologist might, I take photographs of the evidence.

The Périphérique is a modern defensive barrier between intra and extra muros worlds (fig 2); inside are 2.2 million Parisians – associated by writers such as Simon Ronai and others⁴ with luxury, arts, culture and refinement. Outside are 9.6 million banlieusards – seen as anonymous, peripheral and remote from the centre. Even the name itself, with its use of the terms boulevard and périphérique, at once conveys something of belonging to Paris, yet also unequivocally states that it is the extremity. There are no boulevards in St Mandé or Montreuil.

Since it opened there has been talk of covering up the Périphérique. The assumption has always been that this would be a good thing. Yet it has been described as the most beautiful avenue of Paris by the architect Dominique Perrault⁵. On the other hand, Claudia the waitress in Café Tourelle, St Mandé at 8am on 30th September 2011 recognises its negative impact. She makes it unequivocally clear that she wants to move to Paris. Paris is the word she uses. For Claudia there is 'indépendance' (independence) and 'plus de choses à faire' (more to do) in Paris. Café La Tourelle is exactly 152 metres from Paris (fig 3).

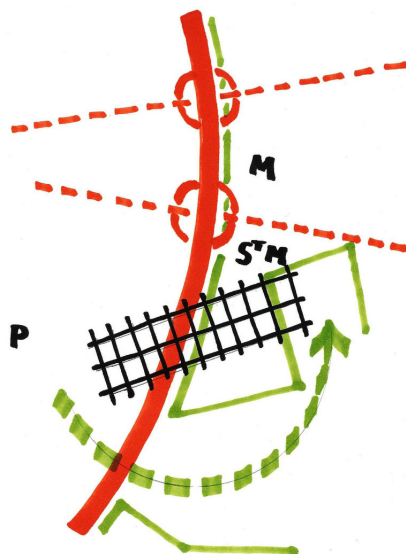


Figure 1. Credit: Mike Devereux



Figure 3. Credit: Mike Devereux

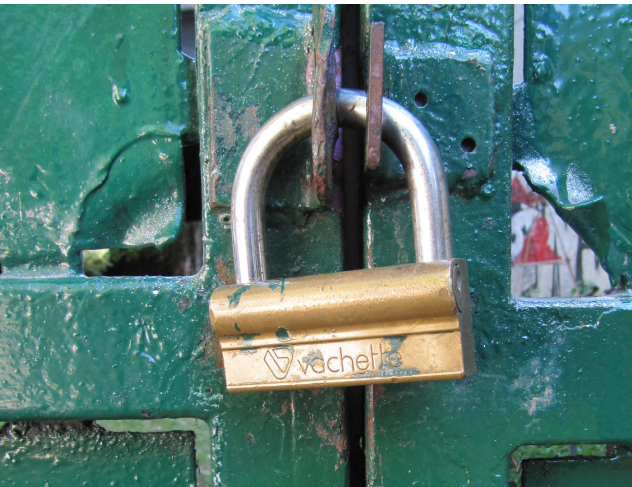


Figure 4. Credit: Mike Devereux

The former wall consisted of gates, ramparts and bastions. The Périphérique is no different with its high walls, acoustic screens, floodlights and access towers. Today's modern gates can still be closed off (fig 4). Entry into and out of Paris is controlled. Street surfaces change at the border – black is Paris, red is St Mandé (fig 5). But Paris extends beyond 'the wall'. Building forms and street orientation are overt evidence, whilst more subtle clues confirm covert expansion – local classes are not advertised as 'something to do in St Mandé' but as something to do 'in Paris'. However these Parisian advances meet resistance. Streets perpendicular to Napoleon's radial patterns act as barriers. Haussmann would have levelled this had we been in Paris. Two hundred metres from the wall and the semiotic of the mairie and école imposing their communal self identity confirms we have left Paris (fig 6). St Mandé fights to keep its identity but Paris surreptitiously surrounds the enclave to capture the Bois de Vincennes as its own. The dusty gravel surface says we have crossed back into Parisian territory.

The gates of Paris provide a focus for refugees (fig 7). At Porte de Montreuil they inhabit a space on top of the Périphérique, a no-man's-land, with one eye towards La Police Municipale de Paris; ready to run should they be challenged. But the refugees cannot simply make their home in Montreuil. Montreuil wants none of Paris. It has built its own

'wall.' It has deliberately planned a line of fortification higher, more imposing and more hard faced than any original wall. This line of modern impenetrable commercial buildings with narrow 'gates' and block house windows controls entry to Montreuil (fig 8). Penetrating the commune is off putting and forbidding, territory is clearly marked out and the architecture of defence is evident. Montreuil sees Paris as a threat.



Figure 5. Credit: Mike Devereux



Figure 6. Credit: Mike Devereux

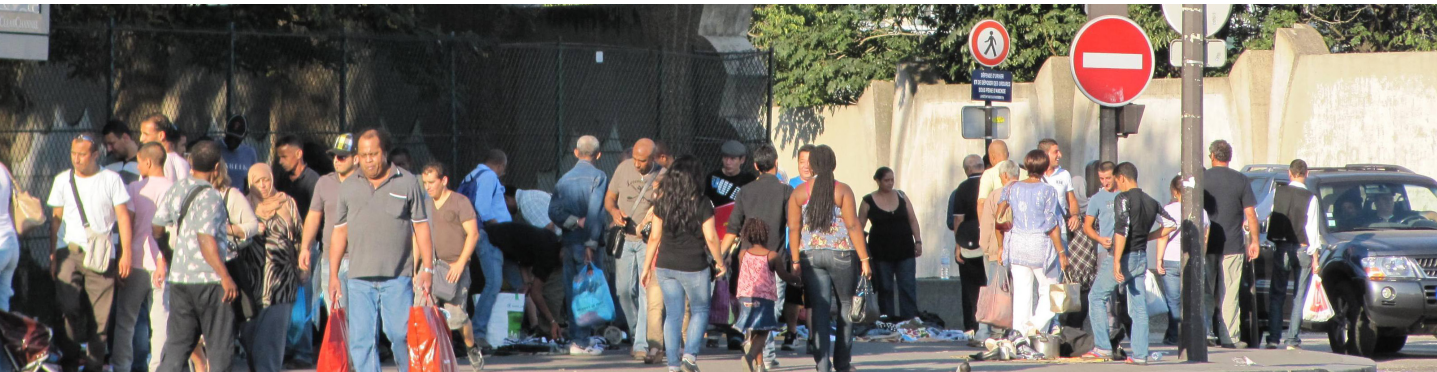


Figure 7 (above). Credit: Mike Devereux

Figure 8 (left). Credit: Mike Devereux



Those considering sweeping the Périphérique away in an attempt to spread Parisian idealism fail to understand the complexity of this periphery. It is far more than an administrative line. It is a front line. The capital's élan needs containing; allowing it to spill out threatens other cultures, equally but differently diverse. Without the Périphérique the ideal of Paris will be diluted. Paris will no longer be Paris.

References

¹ See for example: <http://documents.stanford.edu/MichaelShanks/51>

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For more on psycho-geography see Benjamin W, (1999) *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann, ed., Harvard, UP; Sinclair I, (2003) *London Orbital*, London, Penguin and Self W. (2007) *Psychogeography*, London, Bloomsbury

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